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**For more information**

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# **A Primer: Coping with Post-Disaster Stress**

**DES MOINES, Iowa** —Mental health experts for the Iowa Department of Human Services are urging Iowans to be on the alert for delayed disaster stress symptoms, and to seek free crisis counseling.

"During an emergency, people focus on their immediate needs," said Allen Parks, administrator of the Mental Health and Disability Services division of the DHS.

"It's not until after the crisis is over that the stress catches up with people and they begin having trouble coping with daily routine activities. Stress caused by loss or a traumatic experience can sneak up on people, often appearing weeks or months following the initial trauma," he said.

For many, the disaster continues because of ongoing negotiations with government agencies and insurance companies, frustration at delays, endless work repairing property, financial problems caused by job displacement, and prolonged stress and health concerns.

Parks said it's important for flood survivors to seek crisis counseling even if they think they can handle the stress alone.

"Iowans are remarkably self-reliant, a trait that usually serves us very well. But when disaster strikes, it's important to reach out for help," he said.

Via federal grants, the DHS has arranged for free crisis counseling statewide. To find a counselor in the Project Recovery Iowa post-disaster counseling program, call the toll-free Iowa Concern Hotline at 1-800-447-1985.

The hotline is a call center operated by the Iowa State University Extension Outreach.

Counselors also are on hand at disaster recovery centers operated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Parks said stress is often displayed in subtle but distressing behavior and emotions, and that many flood survivors are likely to experience several negative reactions.

Signs of stress include trouble concentrating or remembering things, difficulty making decisions, excessively replaying events and circumstances of the flood, feeling depressed or sad much of the time, experiencing anxiety or fear, and having trouble sleeping or feeling overwhelmed. Physical signs may include fatigue, chest pain, or rapid heart beat.

Parks said these reactions are predictable and normal when people are forced to deal with extraordinary events.

Parks said mental health experts suggest a number of ways to relieve the symptoms of stress following a disaster:

- Talk about your feelings with family, friends and neighbors. Friends and family are good medicine. Sharing common experiences helps people deal with and overcome anxiety and feelings of helplessness.

- Don't overwork yourself. Take time off from repairs and be with your family. Take time for recreation, relaxation, or a favorite hobby.
- Do not let yourself become isolated. Seek out and maintain connections with friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or church members. Talk about your experiences with them.
- Pay close attention to your physical health as prolonged stress takes its toll on the body. Maintain a good diet and make sure you are getting enough sleep. Get physical exercise every day. Walking is a great stress reliever.
- Seek crisis counseling.

Children often have distinct reactions to a disaster, Parks said. Children may express emotional stress after a disaster with excessive fear of the dark, crying, fear of being alone, and constant worry.

He said it is important to remember that children do not have the same coping mechanisms as adults, meaning it is especially important to reassure children that they are safe.

Parks said it is also helpful to encourage children to talk about their fears and to reassure them that they are not responsible for what happened.

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